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ABSTRACT

Insights and perspectives of participants in administrator preparation programs can provide valuable information concerning what is and should be going on in administrator preparation. A questionnaire was sent to 40 participants of the first UCEA Graduate Student Research Seminar, and 28 (70 percent) responded. In responding to why they had chosen a particular program, 61 percent of the students cited reasons related to practical issues, for example, physical proximity to the institution, inexpensive tuition, availability of financial support, the only program in the area, an easy program. Thirty-nine percent cited specific professors, the reputation of the program, or the reputation of the institution as a reason for choosing the program. Twenty respondents cited location as a primary reason for program selection; only seven cited program excellence as a reason. (3 references) (SI)

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STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR PREPARATION: A FOCUS ON DEPARTMENTS OF EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

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STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR PREPARATION: A FOCUS ON DEPARTMENTS OF EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

It is hardly news that the field of educational administration is under intense scrutiny from within and without. The quality of school leadership, and in particular, the preparation of school leaders, heads the list of concerns. The National Policy Board for Educational Administration observed:

> "Every educational reform report in the past decade has concluded that the nation cannot have excellent schools without excellent leaders . . . Nonetheless, the nation devotes relatively meager resources to producing effective leaders for schools. In the past few years our society has taken steps to upgrade the teaching profession and improve student achievement standards, but we have neglected the equally important task of enhancing the preparation of school administrators. "

Nowhere is the concern more evident than **within** the field. Departments of educational administration, organizations of departments, organizations of administrators, and even private foundations are devoting time and resources to reviewing, assessing, debating, and rethinking administrator preparation.

In critically examining administration from within, the perspectives of field-based and university-based participants have been sought. The National Commission on Excellence in Education, having examined the quality of education across the country, spoke to what the schools must become, how schools will be led, and what policymakers could contribute to preparing and supporting schools. In their report (1988) the Commission cited

"lack of preparation programs relevant to the job demands of school administrators... (and) lack of sequence, modern content, and clinical experiences in preparation programs" among the "troubling aspects throughout the field."

McCarthy, et al. (1988), in their investigation of professors of educational administration, sought to identify, among other things, their beliefs about preparation programs and the field of educational administration. The majority of professors cited teaching graduate students as the most enjoyable aspect of their work, and were satisfied or very satisfied with their present positions. Interestingly, educational administration professors cited the quality of the intellectual climate in their departments and lack of colleagueship as problems.

In its recent report the National Policy Board for Educational Administrators, a consortium of insiders and professional organizations with a stake in administrator preparation, criticized, among other things, the nature and quality of existing preparation programs, the proliferation of programs, and the absence of selectiveness in programs.

The current analysis and debate about what is and should be going on in administrator preparation is enlivened and enriched by the insights and perspectives of those involved in the process. Yet, the insights and perspectives of one of the participants,

students, have neither been sought or obtained. This study sought to remedy this omission by tapping into the perspectives of students about their programs and preparation.

Specifically, the study sought to learn how students in administrator preparation programs saw their preparation programs, why and how they had chosen those particular ones, and how they perceived the program addressed the needs of prospective administrators. Further, the study probed the students' perceptions of entry requirements, the relationship between the department's mission statement and its implementation, the perceived adequacy of the preparation programs, and the changes they thought should be made to those programs.

PROCEDURES

To begin to tap into student perceptions of their preparation, doctoral students were selected as the subjects for this study. They were thought to be more likely to know about the programs in their institutions, to have thought about them, and consequently, to be more knowledgeable and responsive than master's level students, many of whom are part-time students and may be unfamiliar with or unaware of aspects of the program.

A questionnaire was sent to the 40 participants of the first UCEA Graduate Student Research Seminar. UCEA member departments of educational administration were invited to recommend the best and

brightest of their doctoral students to participate in the seminar. Nominees then applied and were rigorously screened and selected. The group that gathered for the seminar was clearly a select group of graduate students. While their perceptions may not have been representative of those of all graduate students, they are, nonetheless, relevant and critical to any consideration of preparation programs.

Twenty-eight of the 40 participants completed the questionnaire, for a return rate of 70% after three mailings. These respondents represented 26 different institutions/departments of educational administration from all parts of the country and Canada.

The responses to each questioned were combined and analyzed. Where numbers were obtained, simple statistical procedures were used, e.g., means, percentages. Where data involved free responses, these were summarized and categorized.

FINDINGS

In responding to why they had chosen a particular program, 61% of the students cited reasons which were related to practical issues, e.g, physical proximity of the institution, inexpensive tuition, availability of financial support, the only program in the area, an easy program, and had nothing to do with the quality of the program or the faculty. Thirty-nine percent cited specific professors, the reputation of the program, or the reputation of

the institution, as a reason for choosing the program. Twenty respondents cited location as a primary reason for program selection; only seven cited program excellence as a reason.

Forty-six percent of the respondents said their department had a mission statement. Twenty-one percent said their department had no such statement and 32% reported they didn't know whether or not their department had one. The overwhelming majority of those who said the department had a statement, the 46%, were unable to state the mission or cited "research, service, and teaching" as the mission statement. Further, four-fifths of this group felt that the department's mission could not be discerned from looking at the program or its implementation.

Sixty-four percent felt the program was preparing them for the positions they sought, but 36% did not and cited inadequacy in the area of research, lack of practical application of what they were learning, of practical experiences, and absence of contact with the field as shortcomings. Forty-three percent felt that needs other than those directly associated with professional preparation were not being met. The concerns they listed were related to perceived faculty inadequacies, including faculty disinterest, research ability and sharing with students. Only 14% of the students reported that their departments involved students in faculty research projects and only 36% reported they were actually encouraged to do research and publish on their own.

The majority of respondents found current entry requirements to be appropriate, i.e., not in need of changing. However 39% believed that they were too lax, and argued that their programs had been watered down to meet the needs of administrators in the field who wanted the degree only to advance. They felt that scholarship had been relegated to second place.

In making recommendations for change, 43% of the respondents focused on faculty problems, in particular lack of faculty interest in students, absence of student-faculty interaction, and lack of faculty commitment to research. The respondents expressed a need for more faculty members with practical experience in the field and more than one recommendation suggested replacement of the entire faculty. Thirty-six percent of respondents recommended changes in course offerings, the majority suggesting more attention to direct, practical course work and a minority suggesting more attention to conceptualization and change. Twenty-five percent spoke to a need for more tenured female and minority professors.

CONCLUSIONS

While the findings represent the views of only a segment of the student population, they do provide a view of the student perspective, one of the few we have. Whether the students are correct or not, whether they are able to make such critical

judgments or not, they nevertheless are the recipients of preparation programs and they are the school leaders who will be in the field in the future. Further, the perspectives shared represent some of the best and brightest students in our programs. This makes their views important. The fact that a sizeable number have serious concerns about the relevance of their programs and even more, considerable criticism of faculty behavior, must be considered by the field as it debates, assesses and restructures programs.

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